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ABSTRACT

Student teachers' perceptions of corporal punishment were measured in an open-ended survey involving 37 student teachers. Twenty-four of the student teachers indicated that the use of corporal punishment in the schools is useful and justifiable. Several suggested that the threat of corporal punishment, even if never used, is a legitimate method to deter students from inappropriate behavior. Many of the corporal punishment advocates felt that children need to know that in life there are often negative consequences to inappropriate behaviors. Other student teachers suggested specific guidelines, such as allowing only a school principal to administer corporal punishment, and notifying students' parents prior to a paddling. Thirteen respondents opposed the use of corporal punishment, based on their opinion that it does not eliminate causes for disruptive behavior, that it causes students to become rebellious, that it does not provide a positive learning environment, that it seems to be ineffective because the same children have recurring incidences of spanking, and that it leads children to believe that violence is a legitimate means to solve problems. (Contains 17 references.) (JDD)

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Running head: CORPORAL PUNISHMENT DEBATE

Student Teachers and The Corporal Punishment Debate

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Despite an ever-increasing number of alternative and positive non-punitive methods of guiding and regulating classroom behavior, corporal punishment remains an emotional and controversial issue in both the public sector and among educators. The controversy has led many districts although few states as a whole, to outlaw its use. Vockell (1991) defines corporal punishment as the infliction of physical pain contingent upon the occurrence of misbehavior. However, corporal punishment can include activities other than the slapping, spanking, and paddling of students. Some examples, for instance, include the manipulation of positive and enjoyable experiences such as recess, free-time or permission to attend sporting events.

Even though corporal punishment is quite controversial, research associated with its use is limited. Among these relatively few studies is one by Rust and Kinnard (1983) which studied the personality traits of teachers who use corporal punishment. They found that educators who use corporal punishment:

1. tend to be comparatively close-minded,
2. were more likely to have been punished themselves while in school,
3. tend to be those with fewer years of experience,
4. display less of a variety of disciplinary techniques and
5. tend to be anxious, emotional and impulsive.

When an individual considers corporal punishment, it is necessary to consider the value of punishment at all. Punishment is defined as adverse stimulus or consequences that is presented

following a response to reduce the rate and probability of the occurrence of that response (Heitzman, 1983). In a school setting, as Vockell (1991) reports, it can include picking students up by the ears, forcing them to run laps or forcing them to eat spitballs. He presents a balanced view of corporal punishment by discussing advantages and disadvantages of the use of corporal punishment. Vockell advocates an analysis of individual school settings before making an *a prior* decision to favor or oppose corporal punishment. Heitzman (1983) explains the pros and cons of the use of punishment. They are summarized as follows:

Advantages

1. Halts undesirable behavior
2. Helps students learn acceptable behavior
3. Halts others imitating bad behavior

Disadvantages

1. Students withdraw in response
2. Students become aggressive
3. Can cause generalization
4. Imitation of punishment itself
5. Attempts to imitate undetected elsewhere
6. Avoidance and ridicule by peers

Heitzman's work seems to show that the disadvantages of the use of punishment outweigh the advantages.

Keeshan (1988), best known for hosting the "Captain Kangaroo" children's television program for nearly 30 years, considers corporal punishment a failed practice and cites 12 nations

including Soviet countries that bans its use. The National PTA's stand on corporal punishment is reported by Ball (1989) citing the use of corporal punishment as ineffective and frequently cruel. Diamantes (1992) offers alternatives to corporal punishment, arguing that the removal of corporal punishment is no more restricting to educators than the removal of any single alternative (in the case of corporal punishment, a questionable alternative at that).

Recently, a midwestern state General Assembly had the opportunity to overturn the State School Board's temporary ban on paddling which went into effect during the 1990-1991 academic year. In this state, as in several other states, the use or threat of corporal punishment had been a traditional, if not a marginally successful method of classroom control over the span of decades. When the possibility existed that the state might be one of the few, remaining States to reinstate the practice, many students, educators, and parents wondered how the change might effect their notions about classroom management.

In an attempt to determine the perceptions of some student teachers--many of whom would be immediately impacted by the eventual ruling--a pilot study in the form of a questionnaire was conducted to determine (1) student attitudes and perceptions concerning the use of corporal punishment in the classroom, and (2) whether or not recent courses in classroom management would have any effect on the students' responses.

Methodology

The question that guided this research asked whether or not student teachers feel adequately prepared to manage today's students without resorting to corporal punishment. The determination of what the student teachers perceived was measured with a single, open-ended survey question designed to educe true feelings, rather than conventional, perhaps even anticipated classroom responses. Fifty students teachers who were approximately halfway through their Spring 1992 teaching semester were given the opportunity to respond anonymously. Ages of these teachers ranged from the early twenties to the mid-forties; some had children and others had experiences as substitutes or as teacher's aides. Thirty of the students had been placed in grades kindergarten through four, nine in grades five through eight, and eleven in grades nine through twelve; each had been placed in small, rural schools. Thirty seven responses, or 74% of the total, were returned. There was no effort on the part of the authors to collect, record, or analyze additional demographic data.

Results

While each of the respondents could, in effect, answer only in a positive or a negative way to the question put to them, the opportunity to define and expand their answers based on their roles and experiences is what gives meaning to the investigation. Twenty four of the thirty seven student teachers indicated that the use of corporal punishment in the schools is both useful and justifiable,

regardless of whether it is actually used.

Several student teachers who favored the use of paddling suggested that the threat of corporal punishment, even if never used, is a legitimate method to deter students from inappropriate behavior. For some children, say a few respondents, such things as lectures, appeals to reason, detention, expulsion, and/or punitive assignments are not as effective as physical pain. Other indicated that corporal punishment would or does tend to help eliminate the carefree attitudes of some students. Some student teachers felt that the use or threat of corporal punishment would teach children to respect teachers, rules, other people and property, and might lead to greater self control.

Many of the student teachers who advocated that corporal punishment be one of the legitimate methods of classroom control available to educators also suggested that it provides "a mean to an end," i.e., 'correct' behavior, that children need to know that in life there are often negative consequences to certain, non-appropriate behaviors, that other methods of classroom control employed be some teachers are "wastes of time," and the "precious educational time" is often wasted when teachers who do not have corporal punishment as an option must argue with, ignore, or use less effective methods on unruly children. Several of the respondents mentioned that the use of corporal punishment in the school setting is traditional and many teachers and parents know of no other method of punishment that is so "effective."

Other respondents in the survey suggested that the use of corporal punishment be used only in specific instances or as a last resort, as opposed to those who felt it should be an open option. For those student teachers who said "Yes, but...," mentioned that physical punishment can be effective with certain children and/or in certain situations. These students suggest such specific guidelines as allowing only a school principal to administer corporal punishment, making sure that at least one of the student's parents be notified prior to a paddling, and/or that a student's parent be present if a paddling must be administered. One individual suggested that if corporal punishment must be used, it would be appropriate in grades three and above, but not below.

An opposing point of view from those student teachers who advocated the use of corporal punishment, if even for nothing more than a threat, was advocated by thirteen of the respondents. Their reasons or arguments seemed to be based both on emotion and on numerous research studies which consistently refute the notion that paddling promotes acceptable behavior.

Several student teachers who passionately opposed the use of corporal punishment mentioned that it simply would not solve any problems, that the underlying causes for disruptive behavior would not vanish with a wave of the paddle. Others indicated that the same children are often spanked, so the use of corporal punishment apparently does little or no good. Others reasons give include the suggestions that its use often caused students to become

rebellious, that it does not provide positive learning environment, and that some teachers or administrators can or could abuse their legal right to use corporal punishment as a means to punish or deter inappropriate behavior.

There were other respondents who indicated that violent acts could well lead children to believe that violence is acceptable, meaningful, and/or a legitimate mean to solve problems. Some student teachers indicated that the use of corporal punishment could cause emotional/physical harm to children, it could present legal problems for those who administer the punishment, and its usefulness, in terms of changing behavior or attitudes, was short term, at best in many instances.

Conclusions

Of those who responded to the questionnaire, sixty five percent indicated that even the threat of corporal punishment should be considered as a means to discipline students. The individuals who responded to the question had the opportunity to base their answers on facts, experiences, specific research data, cultural traditions, and/or emotions. It was impossible for the authors to determine whether the responses were based primarily on the students' roles as student teachers, as parents, as concerned citizens, or as recent members of professional education classes. It was also difficult to ascertain whether the students' responses were influenced in any way by their own classroom experiences, by the method(s) employed by their cooperating teacher(s) and/or their

school as a whole, or by the instructor or content of any professional education course which dealt with management techniques.

This pilot study addressed two questions: (1) what are the student teacher's attitudes toward the use of corporal punishment, and (2) would recent courses in classroom management have any effect on student responses. The pilot study served its purpose in that it demonstrated the need for further study. It showed that twenty-four respondents out of thirty-seven indicated a favorable view toward the use of corporal punishment.

A formal research design is needed to address the question that was not answered by the pilot study: do courses in classroom management effect student attitudes toward corporal punishment?

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